

Medical Parallels

Mario Rinvoluceri - Pilgrims

In 1968 I had just started teaching Success with English, by Broughton, which at that time was a revolutionary new textbook. I was thrilled with the exercises, the teacher's book, the whole approach.

Oswaldo came from Lima. He was unhappy in my class, though he became a close friend outside. He told me to use drama in class - then he could learn (he was an actor). I wouldn't/couldn't didn't listen to his advice - Broughton's book was clearly the way forward.

My non-listening to my student seems to be closely paralleled by the way the consultant in the excerpt below refused to offer himself the chance to listen to his patient, who had lost all feeling that his leg belonged to him:

And now Swan entered, accompanied by Sister bearing his surgical and ceremonial tools on a tray, followed by the Senior Registrar and his Juniors in long white coats.

Swan neither looked at me nor greeted me, but took the chart which hung at the foot of my bed and looked at it closely.

'Well, Sister,' he said, 'and how is the patient now?'

'No fever, now, Sir', she answered. 'We took the catheter out on Wednesday. He is taking food by mouth. There is no swelling of the foot.'

'Sounds fine,' said Mr Swan, and then turned to me, or, rather, to the cast before me. He rapped it sharply with his knuckles.

'Well, Sacks,' he said. 'How does the leg seem today?'

'It seems fine, Sir,' I replied, 'surgically speaking.'

'What do you mean - "surgically speaking"?' he said.

'Well, umm - ' I looked at Sister, but her face was stony.

'There's not much pain, and - er - there's no swelling of the foot.'

'Splendid,' he said, obviously relieved. 'No problems then, I take it?'

'Well, just one.' Swan looked severe, and I started to stammer. 'It's... it's... I don't seem to be able to contract the quadriceps... and, er ... the muscle doesn't seem to have any tone. And ... and ... I have difficulty locating the position of the leg.'

I had a feeling that Swan looked frightened for a moment, but it was so momentary, so fugitive, that I could not be sure.

'Nonsense, Sacks,' he said sharply and decisively.

'There's nothing the matter. Nothing at all. Nothing to be worried about. Nothing at all!'

'But....'

/Continued..

He held up his hand, like a policeman halting traffic. 'You're completely mistaken,' he said with finality. 'There's nothing wrong with the leg. You understand that, don't you?'

With a brusque and, it seemed to me, irritable movement, he made for the door, his Juniors parting deferentially before him.

I tried to catch the expression of the team as they turned, but their faces were closed and told me nothing. Swiftly the procession wheeled from the room.

I was stunned. All the agonised, agonising uncertainties and fears, all the torment I had suffered since I discovered my condition, all the hopes and expectations I had pinned on this meeting - and now this! I thought: what sort of doctor, what sort of person, is this? He didn't even listen to me. He showed no concern. He doesn't listen to his patients - he doesn't give a damn. Such a man never listens to, never learns from, his patients. He dismisses them, he despises them, he regards them as nothing.

(Taken from A Leg to Stand On, by Oliver Sacks, Picador-Pan Books, 1986, first published in 1984 by Gerald Duckworth and Co.

Six years after having Oswaldo in my class, I did turn to drama techniques and found that he was right. He had gone back to Lima. I have to classify myself as a very slow listener, like Sack's consultant. Maybe others have similarly absurd stories to tell.